IMPROVING WELLBEING THROUGH STUDENT PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The research was led by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, the Catholic Schools Office (Diocese of Lismore), the Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, the Australian National University, University of Sydney and University of Central Lancashire.

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Student participation at school is not clearly defined but often referred to in terms of student voice, student engagement or student-centeredness.

This Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study has explored how student participation is currently understood and experienced in NSW schools. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, and informed by Axel Honneth’s recognition theory, the research then investigated the links between student participation and wellbeing.

The research was led by:
- The Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University

And involved researchers from:
- Australian National University
- University of Sydney
- University of Central Lancashire
- Charles Sturt University

It was supported by the following partners:
- NSW Department of Education
- Catholic Schools Office, Lismore
- NSW Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People.

The research team was supported by an advisory group of 14 individuals comprising representatives from the partner organisations, school principals, teachers and Year 7-10 students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study investigated the following research questions (RQ):

**RQ1:**
How is student participation currently articulated in education policy in Australia?

**RQ2:**
How do students, teachers, principals and policymakers currently understand and experience participation in NSW schools?

**RQ3:**
To what extent is participation at school associated with student wellbeing, and which specific elements of participation are core predictors of student wellbeing?

**RQ4:**
Do Honneth’s modes of recognition mediate the relationship between participation and wellbeing?
THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED IN FOUR PHASES:

**Phase 1: Policy Analysis**
The first RQ was investigated through an extensive policy analysis. This included reviewing educational policies, guidelines, toolkits or strategies from the NSW Government and Catholic education systems, as well as relevant Commonwealth documents (total n=143). The analysis focused on understanding the framing and intent of student participation in these documents.

**Phase 2: Qualitative Component**
RQ2 was investigated through focus groups with Year 7-10 students (n=177) across ten schools in NSW, as well as interviews with teachers and Principals (n=32) and education policymakers (n=9). The focus groups and interviews involved semi-structured questions linked to the following interests:

- What is participation?
- Why do participation at school?
- What are the ways students currently participate at school?
- How is such participation experienced?
- Who encourages / supports participation?
- What could be done differently?

**Phase 3: Development of a ‘Student Participation Scale’**
Results from Phases 1 and 2 were used to develop a quantitative scale to measure student participation, wellbeing, recognition and demographic characteristics. The scale's structure, reliability and validity were developed through two rounds of online surveys with different groups of Year 7-10 students across seven NSW Government and Catholic schools (n=536 participants in total).

**Phase 4: Quantitative Component**
The validated online survey was administered to students in Years 7-10 (n=1435 in total) across 16 NSW Government and Catholic schools. The survey tested the links between elements of student participation, wellbeing and recognition, including measuring students’ current social and emotional wellbeing at school.
WHICH SCHOOLS WERE INVOLVED?

Schools were drawn from a purposive sample for each phase - the aim being to include a diverse range of Government and Catholic high schools. The ten schools recruited for Phase 2, seven schools recruited for Phase 3, and 16 schools recruited for Phase 4 were spread across the state of NSW. They were diverse in terms of school size, socioeconomic status, geographic and cultural characteristics, and whether they were single sex or co-educational. Some schools had adopted different or distinctive approaches to student participation.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

PHASE 1

The findings from the policy analysis suggest that there is no consistent or comprehensive definition of student participation. The term is used in an ad hoc manner across the policies and guidelines to describe very different forms of activity or engagement. In some cases, participation is little more than students’ presence at school or being involved in a specific activity. In other cases, participation is used to describe student engagement in issues that are often already decided by adults. Only a few documents make reference to the kinds of intergenerational collaboration central to meaningful and effective student participation.

Overall, student participation was found to be framed in policies and related documents in eight very different ways: (1) consultation (2) engagement (3) connectedness (4) positive and respectful relationships (5) student leadership (6) equality and inclusion (7) a human right (8) collective decision-making.

The Phase 1 findings recommend the need for greater clarity and consistency at state and national policy levels around the meaning of participation and where and how it can occur at school.

PHASE 2

Phase 2 data from students and teachers indicated that student participation is broadly connected to:

HAVING VOICE • HAVING INFLUENCE • HAVING CHOICE • WORKING TOGETHER.

Policymakers mostly conceived of participation in terms of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, such as tailoring teaching to students’ needs.

It was found that student participation is experienced at school in a range of ‘spaces’: in the classroom (such as being able to choose different assignment topics); in activities outside of class (such as having a say in extra-curricular activities); via formal structures (such as student councils); and in informal ways (such as conversations between students and teachers). Other experiences of participation were linked to being supported individually at school, such as with additional learning needs, and in policy development.
The participants identified the following barriers to meaningful participation in schools: policy; time; funding constraints; the difficulties in facilitating opportunities with high numbers of students; and mindsets and attitudes towards participation from students and staff, such as a lack of interest or not being wholly open to or receptive of student perspectives.

Phase 2 findings also pointed to many ways that participation could be improved. These included:

- **Asking students what they would like to contribute at school.**
- **Developing the participation skills of students and staff.**
- **Maintaining on-going communication between staff and students about what is going on in the school.**
- **Making the school community more enjoyable and fun to be a part of.**

Overwhelmingly, both staff and students reported the key role that respectful relationships between students and staff play in fostering meaningful participation at school.

**Phase 3**

The survey responses during the development of the Student Participation Scale showed that student participation comprises six elements:

- Students working together with other students and teachers to make positive changes at school;
- Having a voice about schooling (like classroom rules, homework, learning);
- Having a say with influential people who make decisions (like the Principal or SRC);
- Having influence on decisions that are made at school;
- Having a voice about activities at school (like sport teams, excursions); and
- Having choice (about school or classroom activities).

The Student Participation Scale was shown to be reliable and valid in both Catholic and Government school samples. The structure of the elements of participation did not differ across gender, year at school, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, Cultural and Linguistic Diversity status, or disability status.
The Phase 4 survey investigated the association between the six elements of student participation and wellbeing using rigorous statistical analyses.

- The results provide robust evidence that participation is positively and strongly associated with wellbeing at school.

The element ‘Working together with other students and with teachers to make positive changes at school’ was the most strongly associated with student wellbeing. This was followed by: ‘Having choice’, ‘Having influence’, and ‘Having a say with influential people who make decisions at school’.

The survey results clearly show that opportunities to merely express views – captured in the other two elements – ‘having a voice about schooling’ (classroom rules, homework etc.) or ‘having a voice about activities at school’ (such as excursions, fundraising etc.) did not significantly predict student wellbeing after the other four elements of participation were taken into account. These results suggest that just being able to express opinions at school – without these opinions being taken into consideration in decisions – is not sufficient to be associated with student wellbeing. The research also looked into why there is a connection between participation and wellbeing.

Mediation analyses showed that greater opportunities to participate at school were positively associated with greater wellbeing at school.

This association was partly accounted for by students’ experiences of recognition as theorised by Honneth (that is, feeling cared for, respected and valued at school and giving care, respect and value to others).

The results found that participation predicted greater recognition, which in turn predicted greater wellbeing.

However, the opposite pathway was also statistically significant. That is, having greater wellbeing at school also predicted greater recognition, which in turn predicted greater student participation.

Other combinations of these three student experiences were also statistically significant, indicating the close associations between student participation, recognition and wellbeing.

This study is the first to provide empirical evidence of the associations between student participation, recognition and wellbeing.
On the basis of this evidence, future studies should consider using a longitudinal design so that a causal relationship between student participation, wellbeing and recognition can be investigated further.

Additional analyses also investigated differences in wellbeing at school between students in various demographic categories. Results showed that students in higher year levels (i.e., Year 9 and Year 10) reported significantly lower levels of wellbeing at school than students from earlier years. Further, students with disability also reported lower wellbeing than their peers without disability. These results suggest that students’ year at school and disability status need to be taken into account when designing and implementing wellbeing policies and processes for schools.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that schools seeking to improve student wellbeing would benefit from introducing, monitoring and increasing opportunities for student participation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Several resources have been developed from this research to provide guidance on introducing, strengthening and monitoring student participation at school. These include:

- A Good Practice Guide for supporting student participation at school
- The Student Participation Scale (and accompanying information pack) which is a validated survey tool to measure and monitor participation and wellbeing at school
- Video vignettes on participation at school
- Professional learning resources for school staff

Other research outputs include:

- Full reports for each phase of the study
- Short summaries of the findings from each phase

The above resources and documents will be available at: https://www.scu.edu.au/research-centres/centre-for-children-and-young-people/our-research/our-current-research/schools/#iwtsp

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